

Pentecost 5A, Proper 9. July 5, 2020.
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30. Romans 7:15-25a.

There's an old Russian story about a guy who is being sent to Siberia as a political prisoner. And the night before he goes, he tries to set up a way to communicate with his friend. So he says, "I'll be able to send letters, but of course the censor will read all of them. So here's what I'll do: every time I write something that is a lie, I'll write in blue ink. And every time I'm writing the truth, I'll write in red ink. That way, you'll be able to parse out what I mean and the censor won't be able to keep up." So he goes off to Siberia and his friend awaits the first letter. When it arrives, the whole letter is in blue ink and reads, "Everything is fine here after a pleasant trip. The food is good and the guards are fair. The only problem I have encountered is that it is impossible to get any red ink!"

I like this story that illustrates an incapacity to tell or recognize the truth. This prisoner does not want to deceive his friend, any more than his friend wants to misunderstand. All of the perversity in this story is in their circumstances. Their circumstances deny them the tools required to tell and recognize the truth.

Jesus is a little less forgiving of his generation when he diagnoses them with a similar problem—an incapacity to recognize the truth. John the Baptist came telling the truth. He told it sternly, austere, and loudly. When John told the truth, it was all about the need to repent, the coming judgement, and the wrath that he was sure his contemporaries deserved. And the people, or at least the leaders, did not listen. The truth was standing right in front of them, and they could not recognize it.

Jesus came as the truth and telling the truth, differently. Jesus goes to parties, eats meals with all kinds of folks, turns water into wine. Jesus tells the truth through beatitudes, by declaring blessings on people. And again, the people are unable to recognize it. Instead the leaders are jealous and protective of their own status, attacking Jesus as surely as they attacked John. Jesus is standing there, performing miracles. The truth is right in front of them, vulnerable and incarnate and present. And they will not recognize it.

The truth has come breathing fire and it has come pronouncing blessings and both times, it has been rejected. To what do you compare such a generation? Jesus compares them to petulant children refusing to play the game in the marketplace. We might, though, do better to compare them to ourselves. If we're really very honest, I think we might recognize ourselves in a couple of today's readings. We are like Paul, who wants to do the right thing but keeps finding himself coming up short. This is true even of the things we love the most and are best at. We're never quite as good at parenting as we would wish, or being a friend or spouse, or being an ally of people who are oppressed. Our prayer life and faith are never exactly what we think is probably being asked of us. We just can't quite close the gap between our best intentions and our actually lived life.

But maybe even worse, we're not that unlike a friend receiving a letter written all in blue ink, or kids hearing a song and being unsure whether we're supposed to weep or dance. There

are reasons for this that aren't as simple as us just refusing to accept the obvious truth. There seems to be a worldwide shortage of red ink. In the hallways of power, truth is replaced by propaganda and the common good is replaced by personal ambition. We simultaneously have more information than any other people in human history and with some reason distrust much of it.

In today's reading, Jesus thinks that he and John the Baptist have made things pretty clear. And I'm sure that they did. But still, with Paul I do not understand my own actions. I do not do what I want and honestly I'm not always sure what I should want. Maybe you're with me, here: tired and uncertain and sometimes afraid. You might even say weary and carrying a heavy burden.

Jesus' invitation is not to certainty. It is not an invitation to have all the right answers, to fix everything, and suddenly to be able to perform our best intentions. It is an invitation to the truth, but not in a way where we might memorize and recite it at fitting times. Jesus himself is truth, the red ink of the world, hidden from the wise with their degrees and revealed to infants. And the invitation is to a relationship.

This relationship is built on prayer, trust, and following Jesus to the places where he goes: to the tax collectors and sinners, to the infants, the poor and the outcast. It is a relationship that is best sustained in community, because each encounter with each other is also an encounter with Christ, who comes to us and through us even as he invites us to come to him. Though Jesus says his yoke is easy and his burden is light, it is not comfortable. We know that one of the places Jesus is going is to the cross. We know that it is not comfortable to live with truth instead of certainty, to go to the dangerous, contentious places Jesus will take us. It is light because it is true. It is easy because unlike so many things we might give our lives to, it is worth it. We find rest for our souls when we give our lives to the truth. He is standing right before us. Thanks be to God. Amen.